



Managing Generational Differences

The generations

Understanding and identifying how generations do things differently is useful in making the most of an organisation's people.

One approach businesses have taken to understand intergenerational issues in their workplaces is generational cohorts – people born during a specific time period and defined collectively – and the differences between them. These can include their expectations, behaviours and values.

There are four generations currently working alongside each other. There are specific characteristics and values associated with each generation that distinguishes them from one another. These differences are based on each generation's lived experiences of social, cultural, economic and political shifts that have happened during a lifetime. It is these experiences that unites and distinguish generations from each other.

There are many different theories and timelines as to when the various generations start and end, but for the purposes of this document they can be defined as follows:

- **Baby boomers:** Those born between 1946 and 1964
- **Generation X:** People born between 1965 and 1981.
- **Generation Y (or millennials):** People born between 1982 and 2000.
- **Generation Z:** born in 2001 or after. (Note, Generation Alpha is the potential name for the latest generation, for those born within the past two or three years).

Employer and commercial impacts

An increased understanding of generational difference can have a positive impact on a business as well as its employees. A workforce will benefit from having a broader understanding of the needs of people across different generations inside and outside of the workplace.

A business can benefit from having a more engaged workforce who value and understand marketplace diversity including client trends and habits.

Clients and service users will also fall into one or more of the different generations, and having some knowledge of their aspirations, communication preferences and lifestyle preferences will be beneficial to any organisation in these competitive times.





Career

The way in which each generation views their career varies significantly. Baby Boomers tend to see a job as being for life whereas Generation X and Generation Y change jobs more regularly; according to research conducted by Adecco Group UK, 54 per cent of Generation Y have had three or more jobs already¹.

Salary

Research from the CIPD found that all four generations value rewards and salary differently – Generation X and Generation Y place a stronger emphasis on the ‘whole package’ of their job. Pew Research Centre found that Generation Y is more motivated by making a difference than their salary – 21 per cent prioritise community investment opportunities whereas only 15 per cent were motivated by the prospect of a high-paying career².

Baby Boomer employees are more focused on savings and pensions provisions for later life³.

Feedback

Wanting instant and frequent feedback is a characteristic associated with Generation Y and, to a lesser extent, Generation X. Their desire to develop through regular feedback can be linked to growing up in environments where information has always been instantly accessible. Baby Boomer workers prefer traditional methods of feedback, such as appraisals and performance reviews.

Generation	Communication media	Aspiration	Attitude
Baby Boomers	Telephone	Job security	Career defined by employer
Generation X	Text and email	Work/life balance	Loyal to chosen profession
Generation Y	Text and/or social media	Flexibility and freedom	Work ‘with’, not ‘for’
Generation Z	Handheld digital devices	Stability and security	Move from post to post

Table 1





How to avoid generational conflict

Differences between generations can lead to miscommunication in the workplace.

Raising awareness and harnessing people's individuality can have a huge impact on the way colleagues work together. Conflict among different generational cohorts is likely to occur due to misunderstandings and perception issues.

A practical solution to bridging the gap in generational differences can come from establishing a common ground of communication styles. Placing a greater emphasis on how all employees should interact from a professional perspective is a useful step in removing tension.

Encourage tolerance and open-mindedness to different ways of doing things. Tolerance of different behaviours and styles is essential for creating a harmonious and productive workplace.

Provide opportunities for different generations to learn from one another. For example, introduce reciprocal mentoring schemes. Encourage intergenerational collaboration as much as possible. This can be achieved by encouraging volunteering or creating an intergenerational network.

Case study

Sodexo (2015 Championing an Ageing Workforce Award Finalist) launched its GenERAtions employee network using GenMatch, a specially designed board game. The purpose of the game was to help employees appreciate the diverse workforce that makes up the organisation and the opportunities and challenges this can present. Players had to match statements about work motivation and style, technology and lifestyle to the relevant generations.

The game helped to create a broader understanding of the needs of people of different generations inside and outside of the workplace and provided employees with opportunities to interact and learn from peers.

References

1. The Secret to Managing Millennials; Adecco Group UK; [available at engage.office-angels.com](https://www.engage.office-angels.com)





2. Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change (2010); Pew Research Centre; [available at pewsocialtrends.org](https://www.pewsocialtrends.org)
3. Emma Parry and Peter Urwin (2014) Tapping into Talent: The Age Factor and Generation Issues; CIPD; [available at bobkelleher.com](https://www.bobkelleher.com)

